

Propaganda II

Probably not the first image or explanation that comes to mind when discussing the Democratic Kampuchea years. Embedded in the mind as the Khmer Rouge, in the 1980s the Hollywood movie *The Killing Fields* cemented the motif in the minds of its audience as it brought the plight of the Khmer Rouge victims to worldwide attention.



In only two years since liberation, the people of Kampuchea have achieved a most significant aim - self-sufficiency in grain, won through their concentration on the development of cooperative agriculture on a large scale. The picture shows agricultural cooperative members with newly-reaped paddy rice in north-western Kampuchea, (picture by Hsinhua News Agency). See article page 2.

The Worker #21, October 29th 1977

Some other images less familiar to the wider public:



Obviously children working in the fields, a common sight throughout the Global south,



Irrigation dam construction on the road north. Photo by [Gunnar Bergstorm](#) in 1978. Bergstorm was president of the Sweden-Kampuchea Friendship Association, part of the delegation that visited in a fourteen-day trip through the country in 1978. Bergstrom admits that he was young — 27 years old — and idealistic when he undertook what he now considers a “propaganda tour” of the

country. His photos, all of which are colour, offer a rare “candy-eyed view” of a regime which he sees as determined to deceive Western visitors.

Collective mobilised labour working without machinery



Communal eating photographed by Gunnar Bergstorm in 1978.



A young girl weaving yarn during Democratic Kampuchea.
Source: DC-Cam Archives.



Photo courtesy of DC-Cam

Schooling during Democratic Kampuchea, captioned high officials children



In Democratic Kampuchea, the population often performed backbreaking manual labour and given little food. Top: a women's unit constructing a warehouse. Bottom: youth unit working in the rice fields. *Source: DC-Cam Archives*

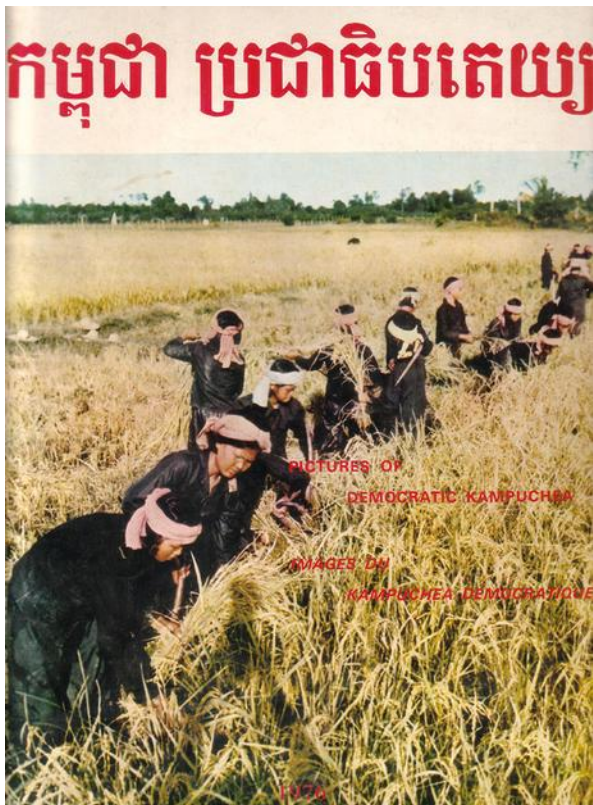


These images of constructive development and normal activities were not the ones that received widespread distribution during the few years of the DK regime. At the time it was presented as a secretive and brutal regime. Decades later the well-regarded British Broadcasting Corporation could summarise its reputation, expressing a common perception that "it was responsible for one of

the worst mass killings of the 20th Century” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10684399> posted 16 November 2018

That image has been firmly set:

“Declaring that the nation would start again at “Year Zero”, Pol Pot isolated his people from the rest of the world and set about emptying the cities, abolishing money, private property and religion, and setting up rural collectives.”



A state produced magazine shows farmers in the fields, with the headline “Democratic Kampuchea Moves Forward.”

The BBC article would, without substantial evidence, attributed the attempt at social engineering, against the academic research, to the idea that inspiration was drawn its days as an insurgent movement, “Pol Pot came to admire the tribes in Cambodia’s rural northeast. These tribes were self-sufficient and lived on the goods they produced through subsistence farming.

The tribes, he felt, were like communes in that they worked together, shared in the spoils of their labour and were untainted by the evils of money, wealth and religion.....in the model of these rural tribes, with the hopes of creating a communist-style, agricultural utopia.”

Some images and information in this posting are drawn from a doctoral thesis from the Department of History at Erasmus University Rotterdam by Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier, *Images of Khmer Rouge atrocities, 1975-2015: Visualizing the crimes of the Pol Pot’s regime in transnational contexts of memory*. (Available at <http://www.dart-europe.eu/full.php?id=1243252>).

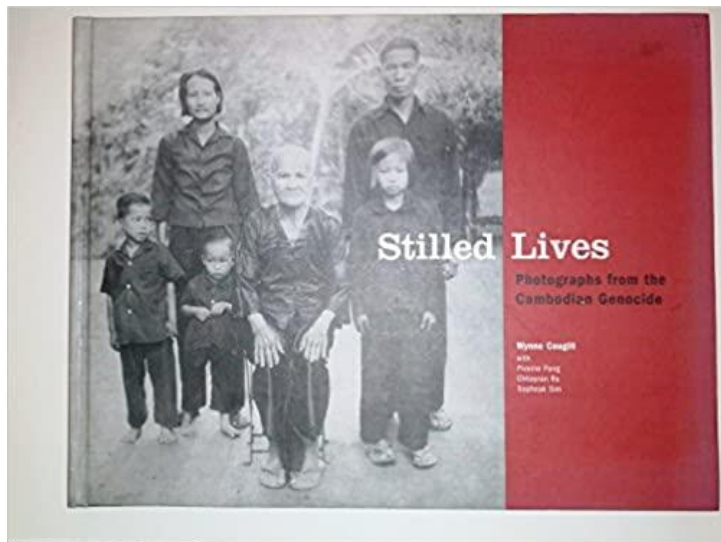
Her study explores documentary and artistic images that shapes to a great extent the understanding and recollection of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and abroad.

Any examination of the visual material that circulates and builds the memory of the regime, supporting the narrative scaffolding of the story told could be subject to similar observations: both those whose narratives attached to atrocities images as a means to fix the “ways of seeing” the crimes of the Pol Pot’s regime, and those whose different interpretations equally employed reductionist images, fail in picturing the radical transformation of Cambodian society and providing a deeper understanding of what happened in Cambodia.

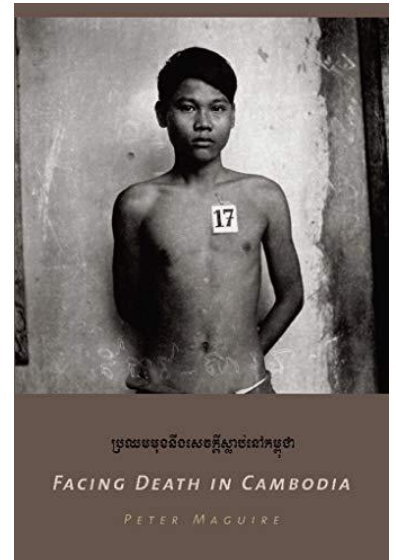


Benzaquen-Gautier’s study speculates “on the impact of iconic representations on our understanding and recollection of genocide: the role of visual culture itself in creating the invisibility and non-representability of mass atrocities as well as the violence of memory politics itself in the present.”

While it is normally the singular images that are used to underline the killing field narrative, photojournalism has given rise to a few publications that focus on, to use the title of Michelle Caswell's 2014 study, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (University of Wisconsin Press).



The Documentation Center of Cambodia produced an album of *Stilled Lives: Photographs from the Cambodian Genocide* in 2004 by Wayne Cougill and Pivoine Pang. (Left) *Facing Death in Cambodia* by Peter Maguire (Columbia University Press 2005).



And there are numerous internet photography based sites that records the attempt to remember the killing fields, the exhibition at S-21 The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum e.g. <https://www.rebeccabathory.com/blog/cambodia-choeung-ek-killing-fields>



When American Marxist journalists embarked on visiting the “most maligned nation on the face of the earth”, the intention was to provide a more realistic picture of life in the new Cambodia. In 1978 they produced

[Kampuchea. A photo-record of the First American visit to Cambodia since April 1975](#)

Told that “Our revolution has no model”, that self-reliance was a guiding principle in challenging the monumental problem facing the poor, war shattered rural society, then with little sceptic gaze or investigation into what they were told, the impressionistic conclusions they drew were translated, as friends often do, into emphatic statements supportive of the new Kampuchea. They, as with other visitors, in solidarity with Kampuchea, tried to portray some of the complexities of development in the aftermath of civil war and amidst new fears and suspicions, they erred on the side of the regime.

And in 1978, *The Call* carried a series of first-hand eyewitness reports from Kampuchea by *Call* editor Dan Burstein. He would later observe:

“There are, however, quite a number of points on which I have changed my views or deepened my understanding. In looking back at my 1978 report from Kampuchea, I must say it was sorely one-sided. After only a one week visit to Kampuchea, in which I was positively impressed with some things I saw, I came back prepared to take on all the negative claims about human rights violations and other issues, claims being made by scholars, journalists, refugees, and others much more familiar with the situation in many ways than I. I set out to refute them all, charging many of them with being stooges in a propaganda war. This certainly was not a “seek truth from facts” method.

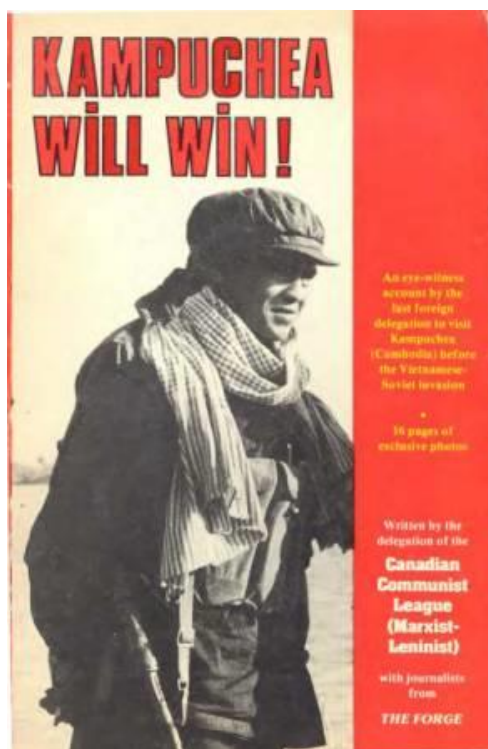
The positive things I saw in Kampuchea were genuinely positive. Significant things were achieved in agriculture and in rebuilding a country destroyed by 500,000 tons of U.S. bombs during the 1970-75 war. Other journalists and visitors with political perspectives much different from mine confirmed that this positive side of Democratic Kampuchea really did exist.

That didn't mean, however, that a negative side didn't exist as well. But towards the negative, *The Call* articles mainly turned a blind eye. I believe my reports as well as later Call articles were seriously remiss in not presenting a more balanced picture."

The committed journalism and the visual images used to illustrate those trips conveyed a partial visualisation, glimpses of Kampuchea, of a society in transition but failed to register the death toll from the tumult of reorganizing the society as rapidly as was done. So within two years, Burstein would argue:

"It appears that a very definite climate existed in Kampuchea that saw physical liquidation of people as a way of solving political disagreements or maintaining the purity of the revolution from penetration by agents. How many killings were actually directed by the leadership I cannot authoritatively say, but the leaders certainly must assume responsibility at least for allowing such a climate to exist, and not taking measures to effectively stop it."

A delegation from the Canadian Communist League (M-L) led by CCL Chairman Roger Rashi, were among the last foreigners to visit Kampuchea, leaving the country on December 30th 1978. They



produced [Kampuchea Will Win!](#) with 16 pages of photos from their visit, naively taking a Potemkin Village stance that: *"We have produced this pamphlet to tell the truth about what we saw and heard in Kampuchea."*

"On our 1000 km voyage through six provinces in the north, central and southeast regions, we were able to stop anywhere we wanted, to ask questions. We saw with our own eyes that the stories of supposed massacres and starvation spread by the Western media were

just lies and slanders designed to justify the aggression against Kampuchea."

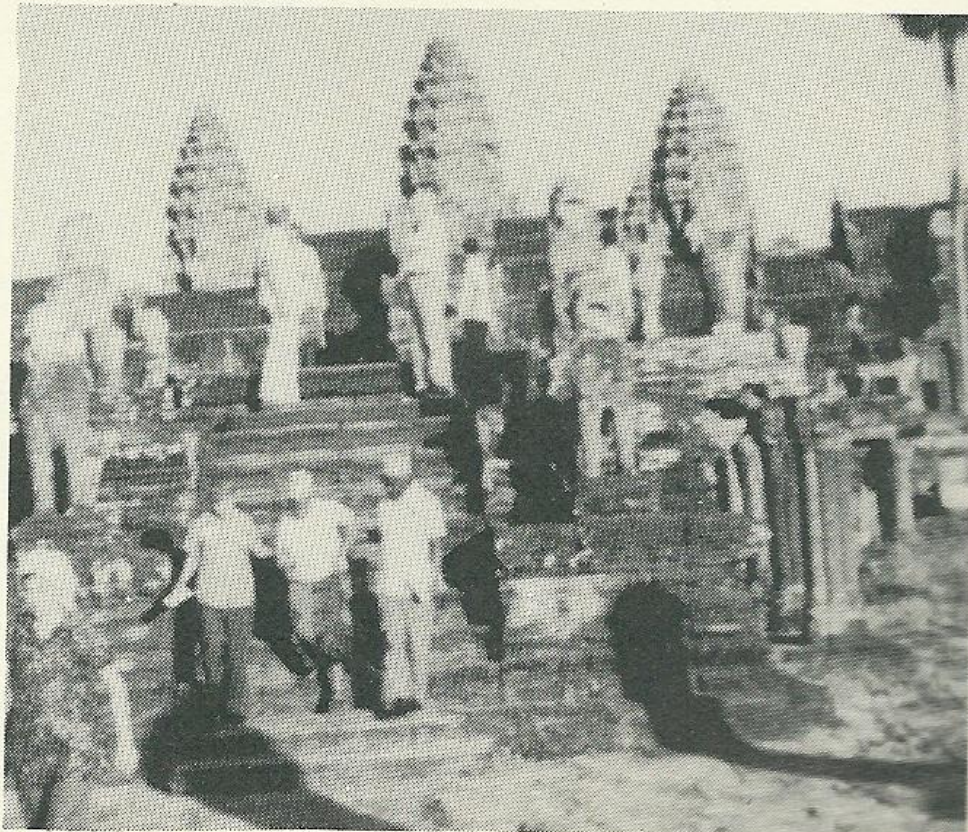
The North Americans were examples of what was seen judgementally as Political Tourism. (see previous posts)

The phenomenon of political tourism, the guided tour and lavish hospitality is seldom evoked with scholarship and conference paid-visits to western institutions and organisations. It was used to disparage visitors to the Soviet Union in the Thirties and other socialist countries since, just a notch below the accusation of fellow travellers. The information famine on events and conditions inside the newly emerging and secretive state made the reports and photographs taken by the various friendship delegation a primary source although treated with a degree of scepticism not applied to external mainstream media reports like NewsWeek..

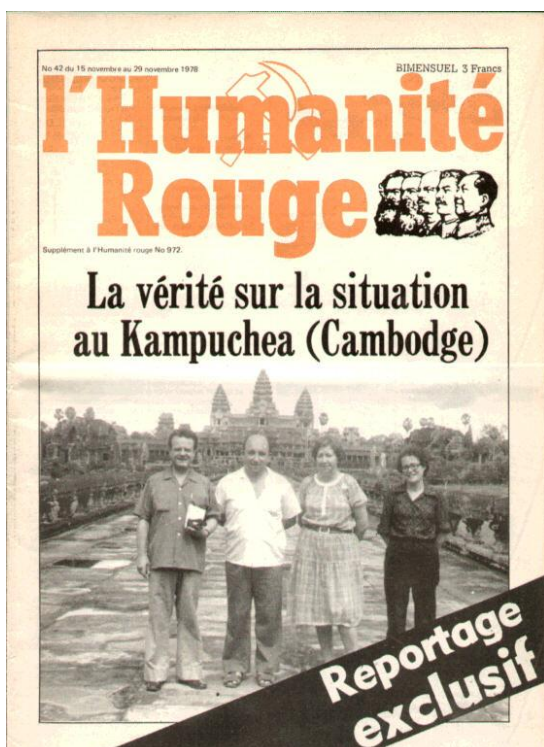
Some tourist pictures from Kampuchea



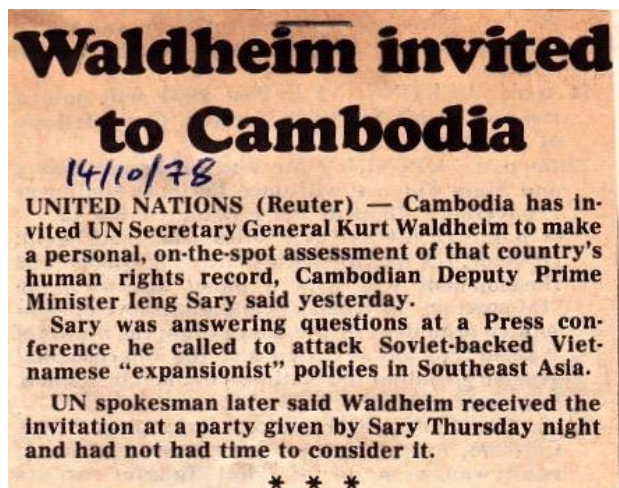
Norwegian delegate Pål Steigan in Phnom Penh (October 1978).
Source: "Kampuchea," *Klassekampen* 262, November 11, 1978.



Entre 1976 et 1978, de nombreux ambassadeurs de pays entretenant des relations diplomatiques avec le Kampuchea Démocratique, visitent Angkor Vat.



Ambassadors and the French Marxist-Leninists made it, but the UN General Secretary didn't.



The journalist Elizabeth Becker sits outside a temple at Angkor Wat with fellow American journalist Richard Dudman (front right), and the murdered LSE academic, Malcolm Caldwell (back left), two young aides, and Thiounn Prasith, a senior Khmer Rouge official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs



Many of the dominant images associated with the Democratic Kampuchea period actually originate from after the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of the country: the piles of bleached bones, haunting arrangement of interrogation pictures from Tuong Sleng are powerful visual signals after the event. The restricted access to the country made supply contemporary images dependent

on the official state sanctioned publications and orchestrated visits.



They were accompany news pictures of visits by foreign dignaries (like Rumania's President Ceauscu) and the occassional propaganda photo-magazine that depicted a country vastly out of synocrination with the coverage in the world's media focused on human rights abuses. In the eagerness to support the print stories, some media outlets surcombed to using fake photos staged on the Thai border of Khmer Rouge atrocities as exposed in Kampuchea Komitee Nederland, *Kampuchea* 1, no. 1979



Another photograph of the destroyed National Bank taken in 1978 by visiting American delegation from the *The Call*, paper of the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninists) was widely used, post-invasion to illustrate the abolition of money under the DK regime.



Days after Phnom Penh was liberated, a time bomb went off destroying this building. (Call photo)

Source: *Kampuchea Today (The Call, December 1978)*.

Meeting with Pol Pot. Source: Leftist Turkish newspaper *Aydinlik*, October 17, 1978, and an image that reinforced the tale of a capital (Phnom Penh) regarded emptied of its population.

Phnom Penh (September 1978). Source: newspaper *Aydinlik*, October 20, 1978

14 Eylül'de Phnom Penh'de AYDINLIK'ın sorularını cevaplayan

KAMBOÇYA KOMÜNİST PARTİSİ MERKEZ KOMİTESİ SEKRETERİ VE DEMOKRATİK KAMBOÇYA BAŞBAKANI

POL POT:

Vietnam'la savaşta bir tankın içinde iki Sovyet askeri öldürdük

8. sayfamızda

- "Vietnam birliklerinin hem ağır topçu komutanları, hem de tank komutanları arasında Sovyet komutanları bulunuyordu"
- Vietnam ve Sovyet yayılmacılığının stratejisi, Kamboçya'yı ele geçirip, Güneydoğu Asya'da ilerlemek
- Vietnam'ın, Sovyetlerin 1968'de Çekoslovakya'ya da izlediği "yıldırım savaş yıldırım zafer" stratejisini yenilgiye uğrattık

Aydinlik October 1978 Salı 17 EKİM 1978

BÜTÜN ÜLKELERİN İŞÇİLERİ VE EZİLEN HALKLAR BİRLİŞİN!

ERBAKAN:

Vehbi Koç: İki büyük parti

orutürk: "Türk-İş"le İSK'in işbirliği

Mehmet Ali Çeviker Dosyası 5. SAYFAMIZDA

TÖRKES'İN MİLLİYETÇİ TOPLUMCULUĞU VE DİŞ'İN NASYONAL SOSYALİZMİ 2. sayfa AYDINLIK MECLİSİ'nde

Kuruluş yıl: 1921 Kurucuları: SEFİK HUSNİ

Yiyecek, giyecek, ilaç, tıbbi bakım, mız kolektivist çok memnun- istegi, kolekti- i güçlendirmek- bu rejim bütün ndaki birlik ve yı güçlendir- list rejimi sağ- iş ve Viet- yayılmacı bü- saldırgan faa- yenilgiye uğ- Vietnam ve büyük devlet, Kamboçya- ist sosyalist saldırıyorlar, Kamboçya azamıyor ve nboçya dev- rında örgüt-

ir soruyu Pot'a gö- asında da kullanma- onuçlarını ndirdiğini şu cevabı

Eğitim yöntemimiz, öğrenim ile üretim çalışmasını bir arada yürütm ilkesine dayanır

Şehirleri, yiyecek sorununu çözebilmek ve emperyalistlerin komplolarını boşa çıkartmak için boşalttık

Başkent Phnom Penh'in bos sokakları

ancak geçen yıl açk- dı. O güne kadar part- adından söz edilmem- nin nedeni neydi? Tü- ye halkına şanlı, de- ve açık görüşlü Kam- ya Komünist Partisi i- kında biraz bilgi ver- lir misiniz?

Cevap: Her tün- dısmam. Kambo- devrimini ve Kambo- Komünist Partisini- etmesini önleyen ön- etkenlerden biri de, timizin yeraltında o- sıydı. Gerek sürekli- si mücadeleimizde, g- se silahlı mücadele- devrimci uyanıklığı- her zaman yüksek- tuk. Kaldı ki, Pa- resmi varlığını ila- menin en önemli ş- madığını düşünüyör-

A scene repeated in the pages of the Norwegian Leftist paper *Klassekampen* 255, November 3, 1978. Although another scene depicts a small group of Workers in front of a factory, Phnom Penh (October 1978).



Arbeidere utafor en fabrikk i Phnom Penh, (Foto: Klassekampen)



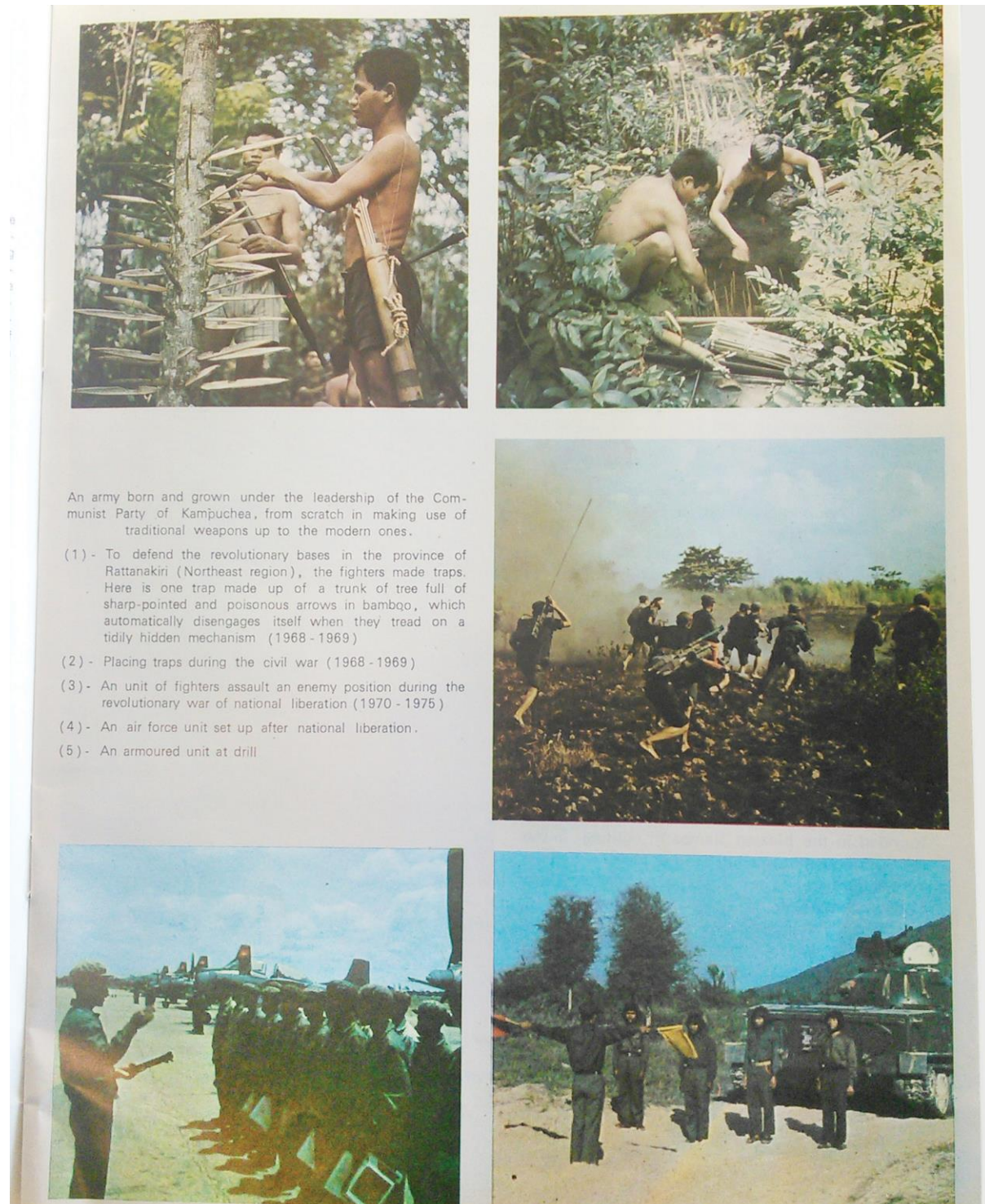
Team working to clean up Phnom Penh where disease and pollution were rampant until the 1975 evacuation. (Call photo)

The American delegation visited in that same autumn flourish that saw multiple overseas guest touring the country, widely regarded as an attempt to increase the international profile of the country facing down a border conflict with neighbouring Vietnam.

They captioned their urban scene as a Team working to clean up Phnom Penh.

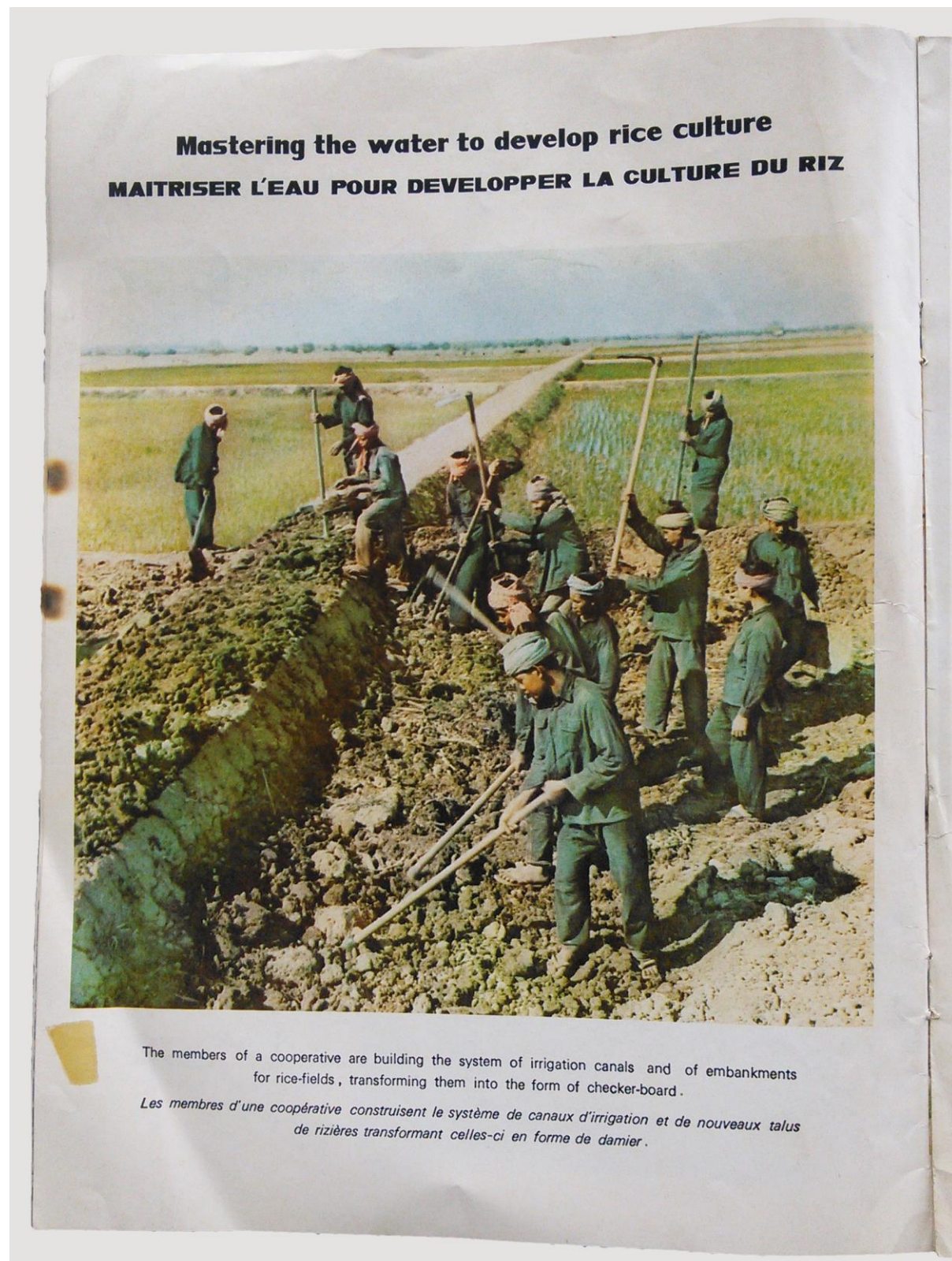
Source: *Kampuchea Today* (The Call, December 1978).

There were attempts to present an alternative view of a developing post-revolution economy and society within Kampuchea (as Cambodia was now known) through photo magazine that depicted a country very different from its presentation in the international press. These magazines were infrequent and of limited circulation and production and failed to register in the popular consciousness, seen as not very credible propaganda



Tenth anniversary of the founding of the revolutionary army of Kampuchea.

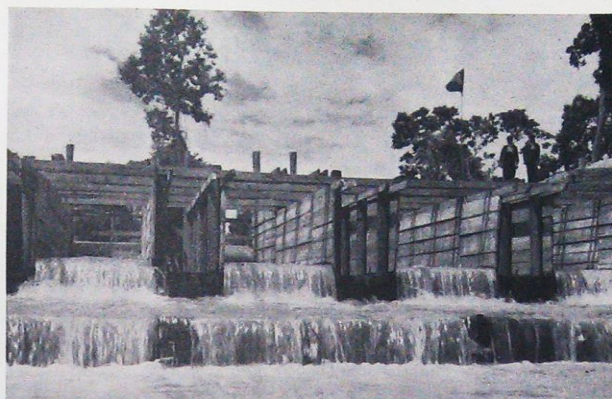
Source: *Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, March 1978).



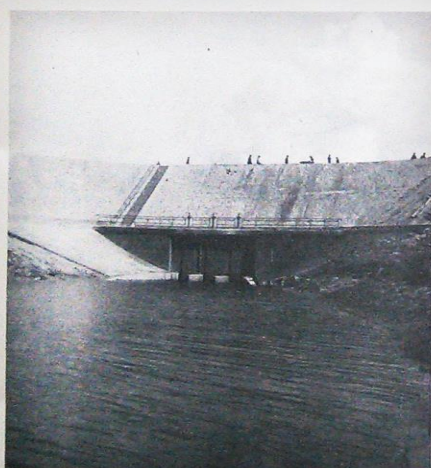
Mastering the water to develop rice culture.

Source: *Pictures of Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, 1977).

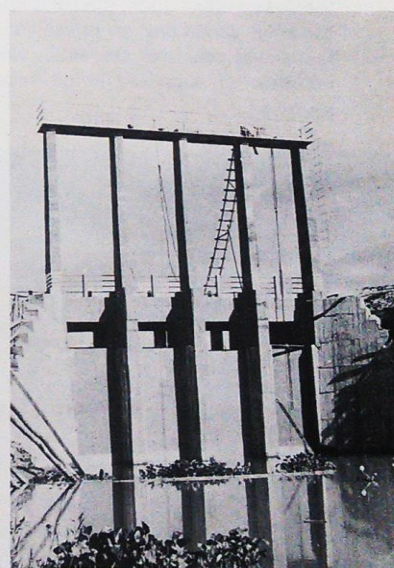
Watergate in Pursat region entirely built out of wood.



The dam on the Prek Thnot river in Kompong Speu region (in the West) damaged during the war has been completely repaired by the cooperative peasants.

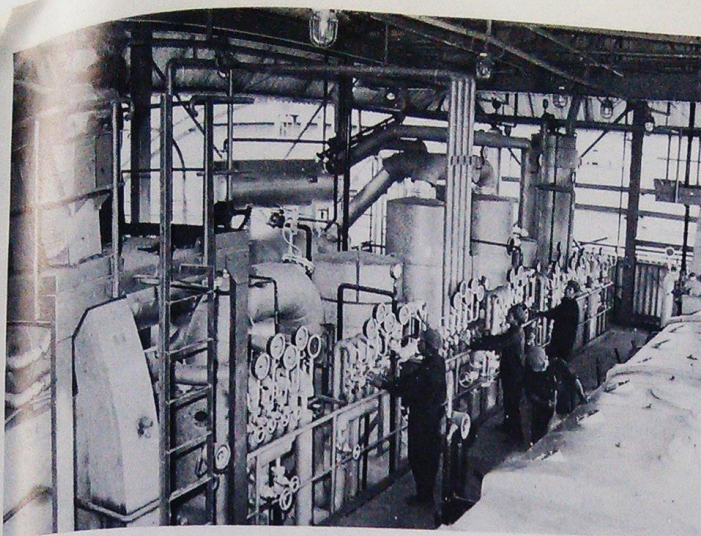


The dam of Baray Tuk Thla in Siemreap region built in the period of Angkor, damaged during the war, has been rapidly repaired and can keep water for irrigating the rice-fields in both districts of Siemreap and Puok.

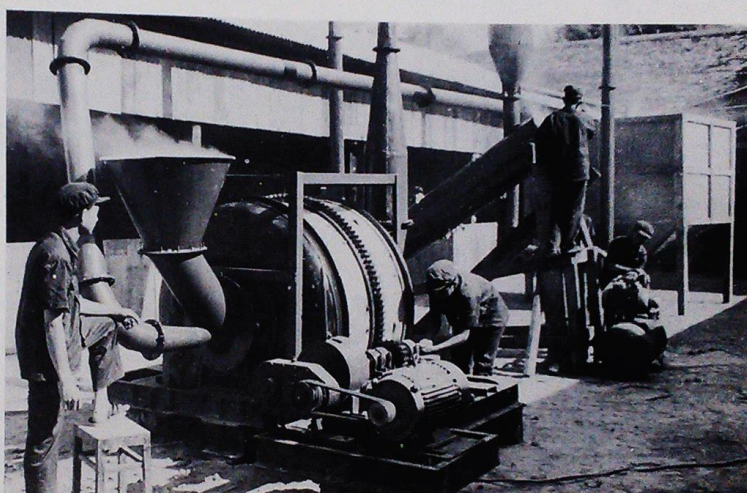


Water-gate in the district of Ponhea Lu (near Phnom Penh) regulating the water from the Tonle Sap river for irrigating the rice-fields.

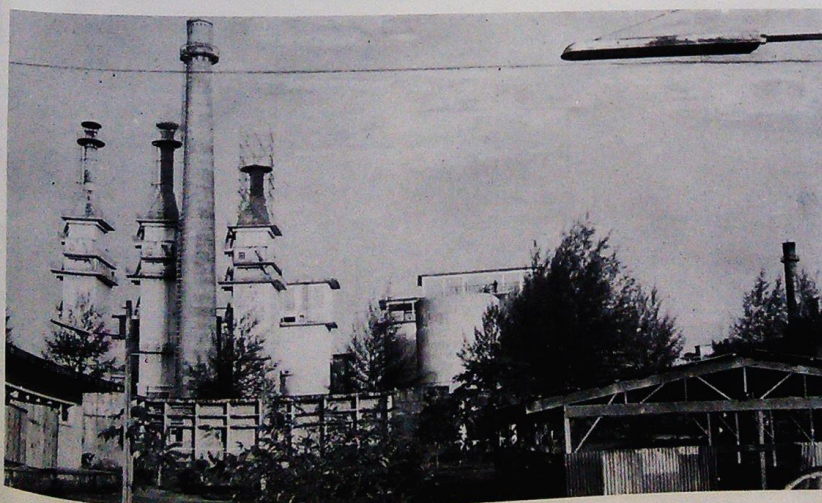
Watergates in Pursat and in the district of Ponhea Lu, dams on the Prek Thnot River and Baray Tuk. Source: *Pictures of Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, 1977).



Bran oil factory

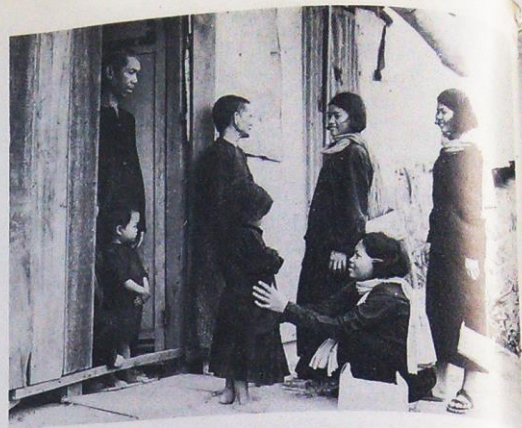
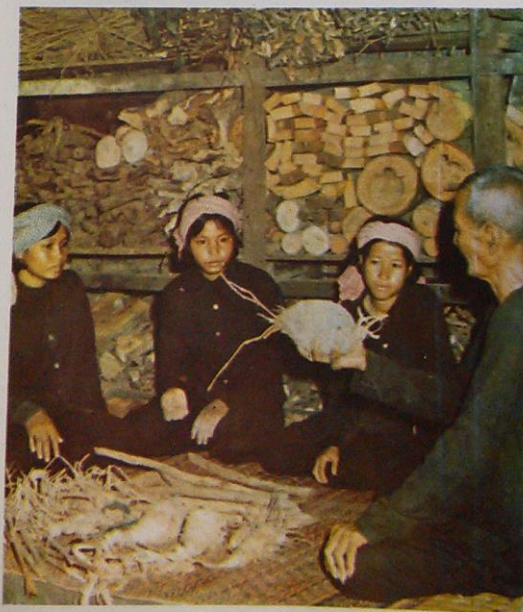
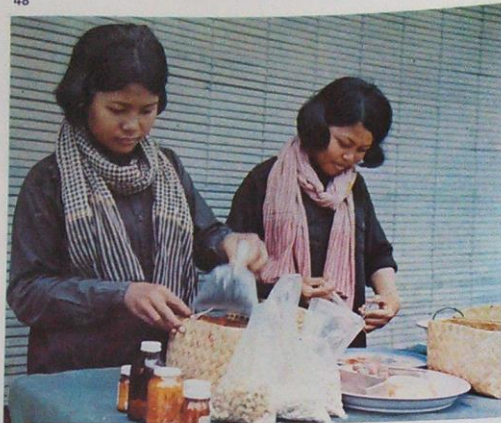


Phosphate grinding - machine



Cement factory

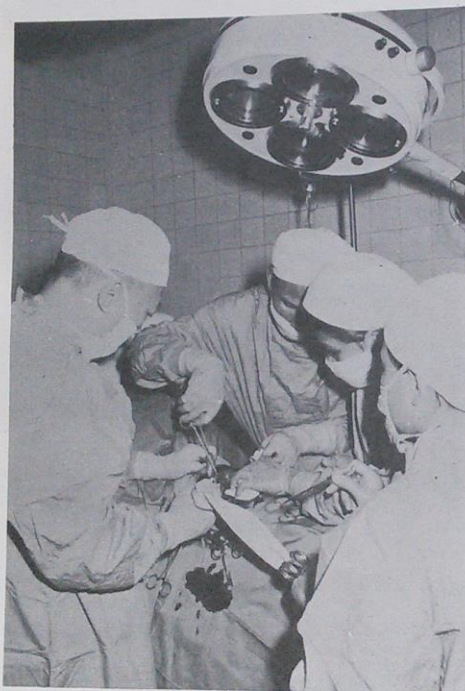
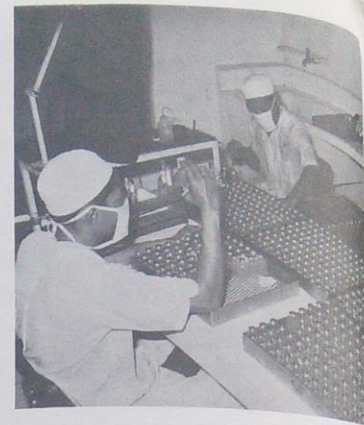
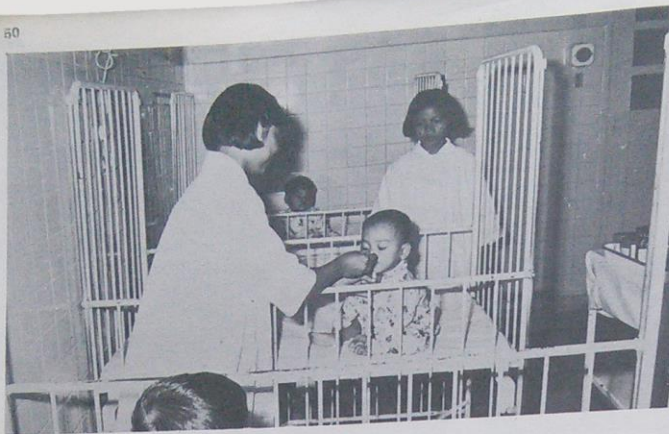
Bran oil factory, phosphate-grinding machine, cement factory.
Source: *Pictures of Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, 1976).



- (1) - The cooperative doctors getting ready for regular medical visit
- (2) - Medical care given at the worksite
- (3) - Learning from olds-aged peasant on traditional medicine
- (4) - Regular medical visit at home
- (5) - Making of traditional medicine
- (6) - For the eradication of malaria
- (7) - Fabrication of serum
- (8) - Vaccination
- (9) - Surgical operation in a district hospital
- (10) - Traditional medicine produced by the cooperatives

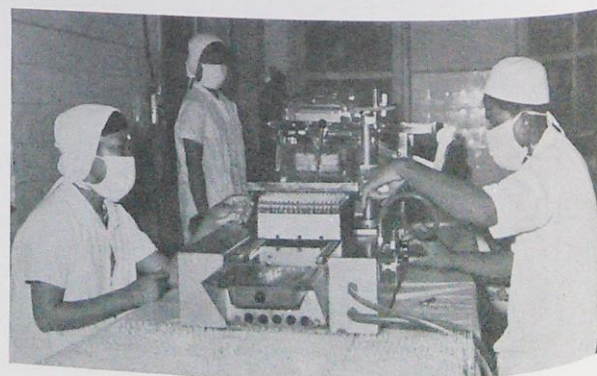
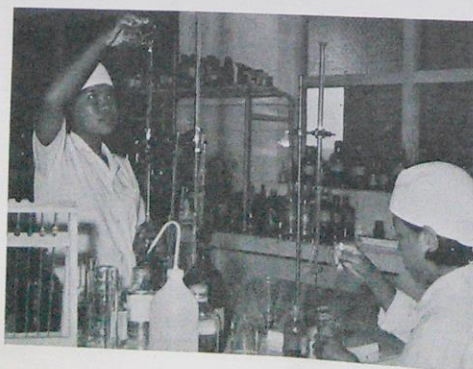


Traditional medicine. Source: *Pictures of Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, 1976).



As for medicine, each cooperative, each district, each region has its own center of making traditional and modern medicine, from the raw materials in the country. Pharmaceutical researches have also been carried out in these centers to use to the maximum the abundant pharmaceutical resources of the country and also to develop the preparation of extracts for the composition of modern medicine. The effectiveness of traditional medicine is very satisfactory and increased with experiences, when that of modern medicine meets with the international norms. The doctors have improved and developed their knowledges by studying in practice and making use of this practice in the concrete conditions of the country. They have then rapidly mastered the various medical specialities such as surgery, gynecology, ophthalmology, pneumology, gastroenterology, ... The young medical students have been trained in conformity with this method and rapidly follow the line laid out by their revolutionary elders.

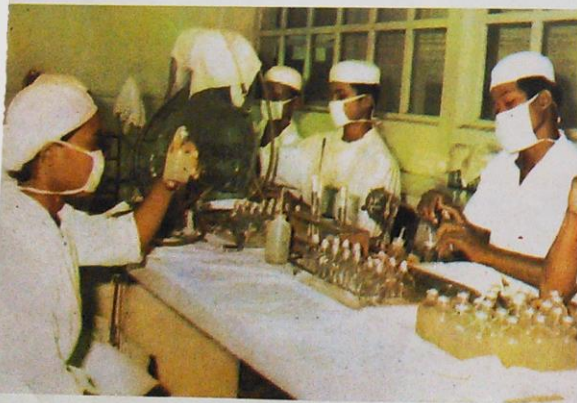
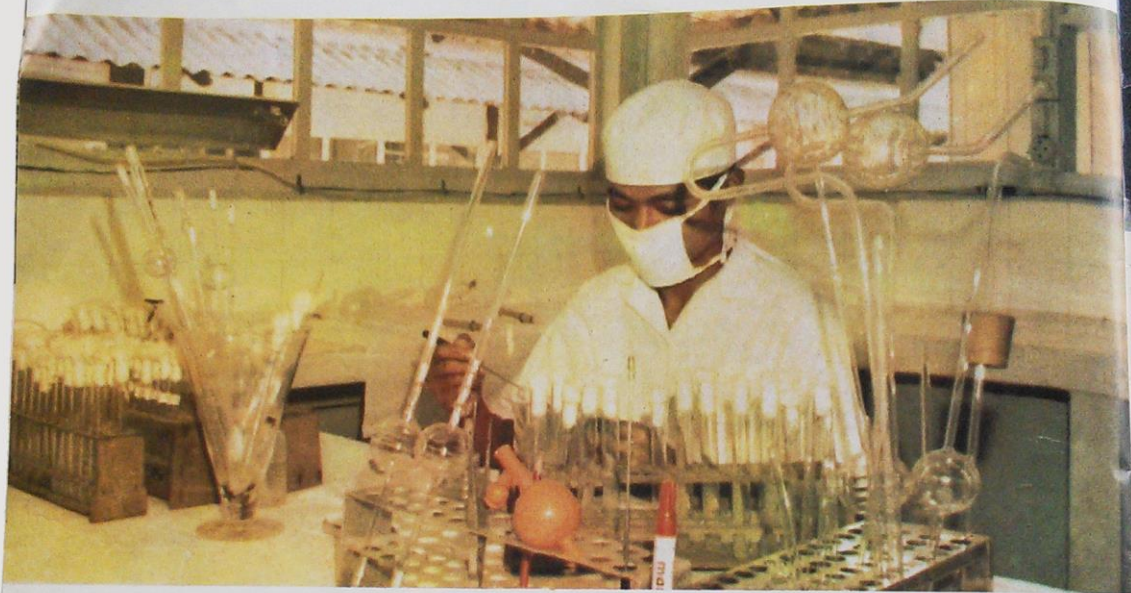
Having unceasingly improved their social, economical, material, and sanitary conditions, the worker-peasant people have full possibility to mobilize all their physical, moral and intellectual forces for defending and rapidly edifying a sound and prosperous new society.



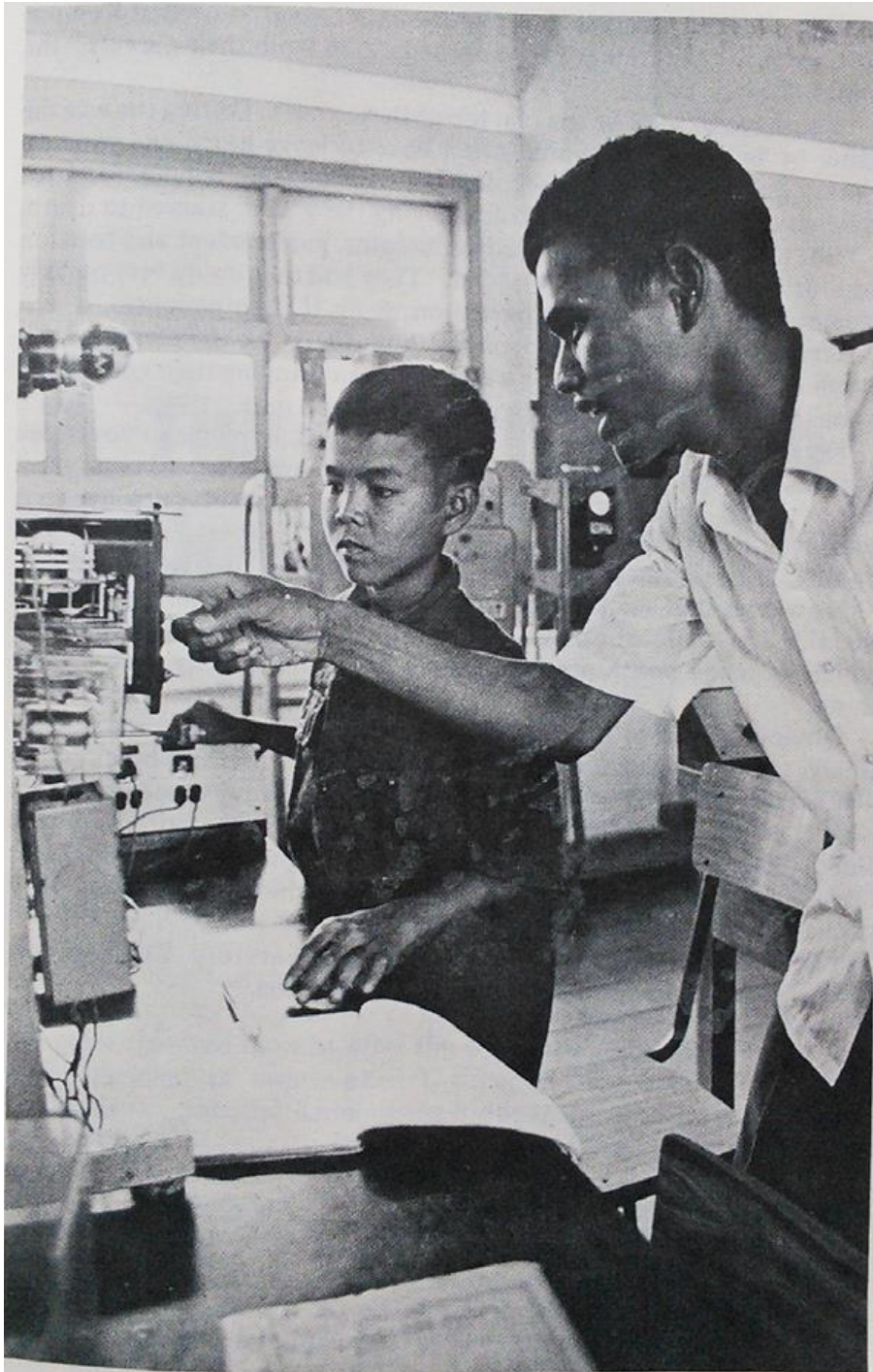
Modern medicine. Source: *Pictures of Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, 1976).

MAKING OF VACCINES AGAINST CHOLERA AND SMALLPOX AT THE INSTITUTE
OF RESEARCH AND MEDICAL EXPERIMENTATION IN PHNOM PENH

FABRICATION DES VACCINS ANTI-CHOLERIQUES ET ANTI-VARIOLIQUES A L'INSTITUT
DES RECHERCHES ET D'EXPERIMENTATIONS MEDICALES DE PHNOM PENH



Making of vaccines against cholera and smallpox at the institute of research and medical experimentation in Phnom Penh. Source: *Pictures of Democratic Kampuchea* (DK, 1977).



Advanced electrical skills are mastered by young students. (Call photo)

Electrical school in Phnom Penh.

Source: *Kampuchea Today* (The Call, December 1978)

The complete picture is elusive, accumulated pictures help contribute to an understanding of what happened, but the image never speaks for itself: it's the viewer who places and interprets the image in a sequence that provides understanding.